

Some dare call it obsession

Amateurs hunt the last word on JFK slaying

By Jeff Gottlieb
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Like Talmudic scholars searching for new meaning in holy books, assassination buffs have spent years digging through the 26 volumes of Warren Commission documents, hundreds of thousands of pages of government documents and assorted films and photographs.

The Bay Area is a sort of Assassination Central for the search for clues to prove Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone, if he acted at all, when he killed John F. Kennedy 25 years ago today.

Says Tom Miller, who has written extensively about the assassination buffs and the less scholarly enthusiasts: "The Bay Area has more of both than any other place in the United States."

Miller, who paid \$1 at an auction for Jack Ruby's can opener, puts himself in neither camp. But, like the other assassination critics, he speaks the shorthand: phrases like minimal mechanical firing time, CE 399, 544 Camp St., the stockade fence, the babushka lady.

The critics are armed, not with Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, but with copies of the Zapruder film, the horrible record of the president's murder that fall day in Dallas.

"Most people can tell you what they were doing when Kennedy was killed," says Robert Ranftel, a 35-year-old Berkeley resident and assassination buff. "We can tell you what we've been doing ever since."

A public mystery

Some people say the critics' interest in the Kennedy assassination is an obsession. Not all the critics disagree.

"What does society expect?" says Josiah Thompson, a Haverford College professor turned San Francisco private eye who wrote the book "Six Seconds in Dallas."

"The president was murdered in a public square with 400 people looking on with 38 taking photos. And 25 years later, not only don't we know who did it and why, but we don't even know what happened."

Obsession, however, is a word that rankles Paul Hoch, who holds a doctorate in physics from the



David Hornback — Mercury News

Paul Hoch has devoted many years and several filing cabinets to the quest

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University of California, Berkeley. Hoch, 46, with red hair and a full beard, works two half-time jobs.

He gets paid for his position as a programmer and analyst at Berkeley. The rest of the week, he spends on Kennedy assassination research, buried in his small, cluttered office off the kitchen of the Berkeley home he shares with his wife and two young daughters.

The four metal filing cabinets and 20 boxes of files threaten to advance on the rest of the house, but Hoch's wife is manning the barricades against them.

"If I had spent the last 25 years

studying elementary particle physics, no one would ask about obsession," Hoch bristles. "The only reason people say that is because we aren't affiliated with universities or research institutions."

Three or four times a year, Hoch sends 230 researchers a 10-page newsletter, "Echoes of Conspiracy," which he began 10 years ago.

Asked why he continues, Hoch's 11-year-old daughter pipes in, "Because nobody knows who did it yet." Her father has taught her well.

Critics say they keep going because new bits of information continue to be discovered. "There is the frustration of not knowing who did it but the fascination of always finding new facts," Ranftel says.

Thompson, 51, has dropped in and out of the Kennedy assassination controversy. When he started studying the killing in 1965, he was a professor whose specialties were Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, not Oswald and Ruby, who killed Oswald on live TV.

In the mid-1960s, Thompson headed to Dallas with a \$78 Abney level and set about measuring bul-

let angles. "It was not what academics did," he says. "It was a little bit more respectable than UFOs, but not a lot more."

Critics win credibility

With the 25th anniversary of the killing, he has come out of retirement, and, like Hoch and Ranftel, has been interviewed on several television shows. Last weekend, Thompson flew to Pittsburgh to give the keynote address at a conference on the assassination.

The conspiracy theorists are now being taken seriously. The latest official version of the slaying, from the House Select Committee on Assassinations in 1978, said there probably was a conspiracy, led by organized crime figures.

Several experts tell a story about a Los Angeles researcher who had been studying photographs of Dealey Plaza, looking for assassins on the grassy knoll. If he were successful, it would be proof of conspiracy.

His work consumed him. He would look at unrelated photographs and spot hidden gunmen. When he noticed snipers hiding in the trees outside his apartment, he knew something wasn't right.